

## Tracing evangelization a tough task in China; one man's work offers rare insight into Catholic numbers



*Churchgoers in Xian sit outside a packed cathedral during Sunday morning Mass. Rapid urban migration has caused the congregation size to swell.*

Liu Yunxiao may have visited more Chinese churches than anyone, and there's little doubt no one has seen more of them in his home province of Shaanxi.

A stocky man with silvery hair, 65-year-old Liu has spent the past 30 years documenting Catholicism in this central province, often in mind-numbing detail.

In his self-published book on his home diocese Zhouzhi, Liu notes the priest's house in Fujiazhuang village has a modest kitchen of 5.4 sq ms, one of hundreds of rooms which he has measured across the province.

"I rode around this diocese eight times by bicycle," he says. Research on Zhouzhi diocese took six years, he adds.

While many of the documents piled up in Liu's study are for diehard historians only, some contain perhaps the most detailed and accurate data we have on the Church in central China since the Communist Party allowed religion to make a comeback in the early 1980s.

As such, Liu's work provides a recent snapshot of the number of Catholics here three decades after Deng Xiaoping's 'reform and opening' and, by extension, a rare insight into evangelization.

His life reflects the changing fortunes of religion in China. A seminarian between 1955 and 1960, he then became a farmer when religion was all but abolished by Mao Zedong. In 1974, when the Cultural Revolution and its harsh cleansing of Chinese society was drawing to a close, Liu worked in a village clinic until he became an amateur historian in 1984 following encouragement from a local bishop.

"The history of the Church before liberation [by the Communists in 1949] is already written," he says. "But after liberation, few people wrote about the Church. I wanted to give something back by keeping the real history of that period."



Liu Yunxiao says he has visited well over 300 churches in China, many of them in his home province of Shaanxi

### **Evangelization: A numbers game**

Much of the data we have on Chinese Catholics is so skewed by politics it becomes meaningless.

In the mid-17th century at the beginning of the Qing period, the last of China's dynasties, there were about 300,000 documented Catholics in China, about half of them in Shaanxi. This central province south of the Great Wall was the Vatican's strongest foothold in the Middle Kingdom at the time.

With the number of Chinese increasing roughly tenfold since, the government today claims six million Catholics countrywide which, if correct, would mean Catholics make up roughly double the percentage of the population compared to 370 years ago but still less than 0.5 percent.

Researchers outside the Chinese mainland have produced much higher figures. The Holy Spirit Study Center, an organ of Hong Kong diocese, says there are 12 million Catholics in China, while the US faith ministry Asia Harvest in 2010 posted the highest recent estimate at some 21.3 million.

None have employed the rigorous tallying methods employed by Liu, albeit on a much smaller scale. Visiting every village in two of Shaanxi's eight dioceses over more than a decade, he says he counted every single Catholic. His controversial findings highlight just how little we know about the net result of recent evangelization in China.

For years, bishops have claimed that there were at least 50,000 Catholics in Sanyuan diocese. But Liu's recent research found just 29,000, a symptom perhaps of efforts by Church leaders to inflate numbers to justify the construction and repair of churches with the authorities, according to a priest in Xian, Shaanxi's provincial capital.

“Still the bishops say they don’t believe these numbers, that they are too small,” says Liu.

Far from a decline in the number of Catholics, he says Sanyuan has been the most successful diocese in Shaanxi when it comes to evangelizing.

“In reality, the numbers are increasing a lot,” says Liu. They were just inaccurate in the first place.

Sanyuan is home to what many Shaanxi Catholics call the most successful evangelizer in the whole province, an elderly woman who claims to have baptized more than 1,000 people, singlehandedly starting a whole new Catholic settlement.

The church compound in her home town has in recent years set up a Catechist training school where young Chinese from across the country are packed into dormitories, returning to their homes when the course is completed to spread the word of God.

“Even though they are lacking money, they are spending a lot on training Catechists,” says Liu.

In his home diocese, Zhouzhi, the steady growth in the number of Catholics is more organic, he says.

Traditionally, faithful sons and daughters are born into Catholic families, go to Mass, grow up and marry likeminded churchgoers.

Pockets of Shaanxi province are heavily populated with villages made up almost entirely of Catholics. Driving out of Xian to the southwest of the city, the landscape soon changes to rows of grape vines for making wine – some of it for Communion – and church spires dot the horizon. In this area where Liu lives, many villages are almost entirely Catholic and have remained so ever since European missionaries began to convert people here a century or more ago.

But with China's rapid urban migration, many villages are emptying, adding another complication to the task of tracing Catholics, and challenging the Church to rethink evangelization.

## **The Church in changing China**

On a recent Sunday, Xian Cathedral just inside the old city walls was packed. About 450 people were crammed inside, some standing in the aisles. Outside, latecomers pulled plastic chairs from a tall stack and sat down opposite the front door. The plastic chairs have been used for the past five years or so as the congregation has swelled with villagers coming to the city to seek work.

“There are two types of migrants: Some feel lonely when they get to the city and so they are active in seeking out the Church and they become more devout,” says Xian Bishop Anthony Mingyan Dang. “Some lose their faith.”

Bai Yunchuan, a migrant from a village 90 kms from Xian, goes to the cathedral every Sunday but attends Mass far less than she used to, she says.

Since she left her village six years ago, Bai has worked in city restaurants. In March, she opened her own noodle shop while her husband did the same close by, just five stops apart on Xian's intercity bus network.

“In the village you just stop your work and go to church in the evening,” says Bai. “Here you cannot stop because people are still eating.”

Her 14-year-old son lives back in the village with her grandparents where the number of people is dwindling. Similarly, congregation sizes are becoming smaller. Like many Chinese wives, Bai found her husband in a nearby village and left her home to move in with him. Her parents were adamant that she should marry another Catholic. “It was a must,” she says.

Father Stephen Chen Ruixie, director of the Catholic Social Service Center based within the compound

of Xian Cathedral, says it's this kind of attitude that the Church must abandon if it is to begin to see a greater uptick in evangelization, especially as Catholics fan out ever more widely in search of work.

It's a way of thinking which has been slow to change in rapidly developing China, he says.

When Fr Chen's nephew became friendly with a non-Catholic girl in high school, most of the family didn't encourage their relationship.

"But I said 'no,' it's okay," he says. "Now they are married."

Although Fr Chen says that this attitude is starting to die among priests, a few still preach that the faithful should only marry fellow Catholics.

"Some try to stop the sacraments [for those that marry non-Catholics]," he says.

While many of the challenges facing the Church are cultural, and some symptoms of the upwards trajectory of the Chinese economy, perhaps the biggest obstacle remains the government. Like almost every corner of China, Shaanxi has had its fair share of problems with the authorities.

## **Facing restrictions**

In September 2006, government officials detained Wu Qinjing, an illicitly ordained bishop in Xian, reportedly striking him as they forced him into a vehicle. Six days later a hospital diagnosed him with a concussion. The following March, the bishop was reportedly sent to government reform through education for three days, enforced indoctrination which the Communist Party recently promised to abolish.

Bishop Wu has still not been approved by the Party-controlled Catholic Patriotic Association, which

has three of its staff placed at offices within the compound of Xian Cathedral. The bishop remains unable to travel outside of Xian without the express permission of authorities, meaning he cannot reach Catholics in Zhouzhi diocese, however many there may be.

Liu's research showed just over 55,000 in Zhouzhi in 2008, while the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) said the number was much lower when it published its latest figures a year later.

A social scientist in Xian who studies religion in Shaanxi and declined to be named says that the manner in which SARA compiles figures on the number of Catholics is not only inaccurate, it inherently encourages prejudiced behavior against the faithful – of all religions.

Local cadres are asked how many Catholics live in their area and these numbers are sent back to Beijing, passing through the various stages of county-level and provincial authority.

“Usually the numbers are too low, sometimes they are actually higher, but mostly they are lower,” says the social scientist.

With religion still viewed as an alien threat to the party and state, local Chinese cadres have an automatic predisposition to play down the numbers with higher-ups and, in turn, justify and maintain their validity.

SARA claims that there are just 230,000 Catholics in Shaanxi, or 0.85 percent of the provincial population. Church leaders say there are around 300,000 Catholics in the province, while high-balling Asia Harvest puts the number at just under 834,000.

Liu's figure would perhaps be the most accurate. But he has only pedaled his bicycle the full way around two of Shaanxi's eight dioceses, documenting 84,000 Catholics in Zhouzhi and Sanyuan.

The social scientist says that despite the lack of clear data, Shaanxi's total Catholic population is

definitely going up, both in numbers and as a percentage of the total population. Liu agrees with this assessment.

By the end of the Qing Dynasty, a century ago, there were about 300,000 documented Catholics in the province.

“The number now is about the same as it was then,” says the social scientist.

The population in 1912 was about a third of what it is now so the percentage of Catholics in this province today is down considerably. But the fact Shaanxi has recovered to about the same numbers, and these are growing, represents progress in a province once home to more Catholics than any other in the country, he says.

After the dark days of Chairman Mao, Catholicism here may finally “be starting to recover,” he adds

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